DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 869 RC 014 307

AUTHOR Ballard, Chester C.
TITLE The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Federal Budget Cutbacks.
PUB DATE Aug 83
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Rural Sociological Society Meeting (Lexington, KY, August 17-20, 1983). Funding for this research was provided by a faculty grant from Longwood College.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Characteristics; Community Problems; Community Relations; Community Resources; Community Study; Economically Disadvantaged; *Economic Change; Economic Status; Federal Aid; *Financial Support; Research Methodology; Rural Development; *Rural Environment; *Social Differences; Values
IDENTIFIERS Community Portrait Analysis; Conservatism; *Impact; Impact Studies; Small Towns; *Virginia

ABSTRACT

Economic status determined the effects of declining public revenues and a tighter economy on residents of Farmville, Virginia, a small, conservative, rural, Southern community with underdeveloped social services, whose class relations still reflect racial segregation, whose concern for local autonomy is so great that external funding sources are viewed as "outside intervention," and whose adjusted gross income and per capita income fall 25% below state averages. To determine how declining public revenues affected Farmville residents, researchers used a community portrait analysis to interview 51 influential leaders and to observe the various group and class interests within the community. Results confirmed prior findings that federal cutback effects are felt less in rural communities that have failed to secure federal monies in the past. In Farmville, federal cutbacks resulted in the substitution of a narrow survival strategy for a wider outreach function on the part of three social service agencies. Tight economy also created layoffs, resulting in a rich labor pool. Finally, the economy eliminated financial help for the poor as banks and financial institutions restricted loan policies. Consequently, lower-income residents of Farmville felt the effects of a tighter economy more intensely and frequently than did middle- and upper-income residents. (SB)

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The Rich Get Richer and the Poor Get Federal Budget Cutbacks

Chester C. Ballard
Longwood College
Farmville, Virginia

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Funding for this research is provided by a faculty grant from Longwood College. The author acknowledges the typing of this paper by Mrs. Margaret Golubic. Paper presented at the Rural Sociological Society Annual Meeting, August 19, 1983 in Lexington, Kentucky.

RC014307

Values are at the center of a long-running conversation, not always a soliloquy, within rural sociology, regarding the appropriate way to study community life. Three foci of concern have been expressed in recent years regarding the proper relationship between values and rural sociological inquiry and can be perhaps oversimplified as questions listed below.

a. What are "rural" values and do they differentiate small town from city human behavior? (Bealer, 1981; Falk, 1981; Pinhey, 1981).

b. Which values guide rural sociological inquiry and account for the knowledge thus produced? (Nyberg, 1981; Dillman, 1981; Flynn, 1982).

c. Whose values define development and whose goals guide program and policy? (Copp, 1972; Peck, 1982).

Such concern for values suggests the centrality of people's values, norms, beliefs, and cultures to "community" life and the diversity which is expressed therein. Rural community, despite its definitional and conceptual complexities, provides a particularly clear arena for inquiry into the relationship of values and class interests (Potter, 1981). In fact, Potter contends that Weber's historical, comparative typological approach can overcome many of the theoretical and methodological concerns expressed about how values are to be understood in rural sociological inquiry. Weber's rural sociology (see Honigsheim, 1946) combines empirically constructed types with conceptually derived types in a holistic, comparative look at micro (community) and macro (society) social forces on group/class interests. Class or sub-group differences in lifestyle, culture, values, etc., do matter when it comes to decisions which affect or potentially affect the structure of opportunity and life chances in a rural community. Noteworthy in this regard is a study by Bachtel and Molnar (1980) which found divergent perspectives on industrial development. All

three questions stated above are addressed as Bachtel and Molnar investigate the "Development for Whom?" issue.

More recently, attention to values, development, and the rural sociologist as information provider comes through in research on the "new information" role (Knop and Knop, 1982) and Federal budgeting policy effects (Lassey, 1983). What better topic than budget cutbacks to address the values, class interests nexus of the rural community? Hinting at Weber's application of "types" of communities, Lassey cites as a preliminary finding that some places fare better than others in terms of the effects of cutbacks in public revenues because such places really didn't receive much in public revenues before cutbacks were made. What, then, can a study of a single "type" of rural community tell us about "whose values?", "what values?", and development. The present study, it seems, speaks to these issues.

The Present Study

The objective of this research was to identify how declining public revenues affected residents of one particular small town. This approach employs a holistic, "community portrait" framework (Kuvlesky and Ballard, 1980) for several important reasons:

1. Typically, impact studies use secondary data sources which frequently obscure the relevance of quantified aggregate level data to the local community;
2. Isolated, extreme case reports by mass media (i.e., family denied food stamps, personal interviews of individuals who have used up benefits or lost benefits due to cutbacks, etc.) while sensitizing, can lead to misguided "personal troubles" (Mills, 1959) analyses; and
3. The value positions of rural sociologists who produce such impact studies have been charged with either selective bias based on

sponsorship or loss of objectivity due to the nature of collecting observations as "insiders" or relying on local "experts".

Community Portrait Analysis

Conceptually, the Community Portrait research design affords a wide-ranging, hopefully inclusive look at the various groups and sub-groups, and therefore class interests within a particular locality (see Figure 1). Although a geographic unit serves as an empirical referent, interactional and self-definitions of "community" remain the criteria for conceptualization and interpretation. Clearly, public revenue declines might be expected to more sharply affect social services, local government, education, and other institutions which are, in part, funded by external tax revenues. Community Portrait Analysis thus provides a design to gain observations of primary and secondary effects within the context of class relations. Policy decisions in each component, for example, government or recreation, reflect value orientations that indicate the interactive group relations in the community (i.e., service provider-consumer, owner-worker, policy decision-makers-general public, growth coalition-nongrowth coalition, etc.).

Observations and Data Collection

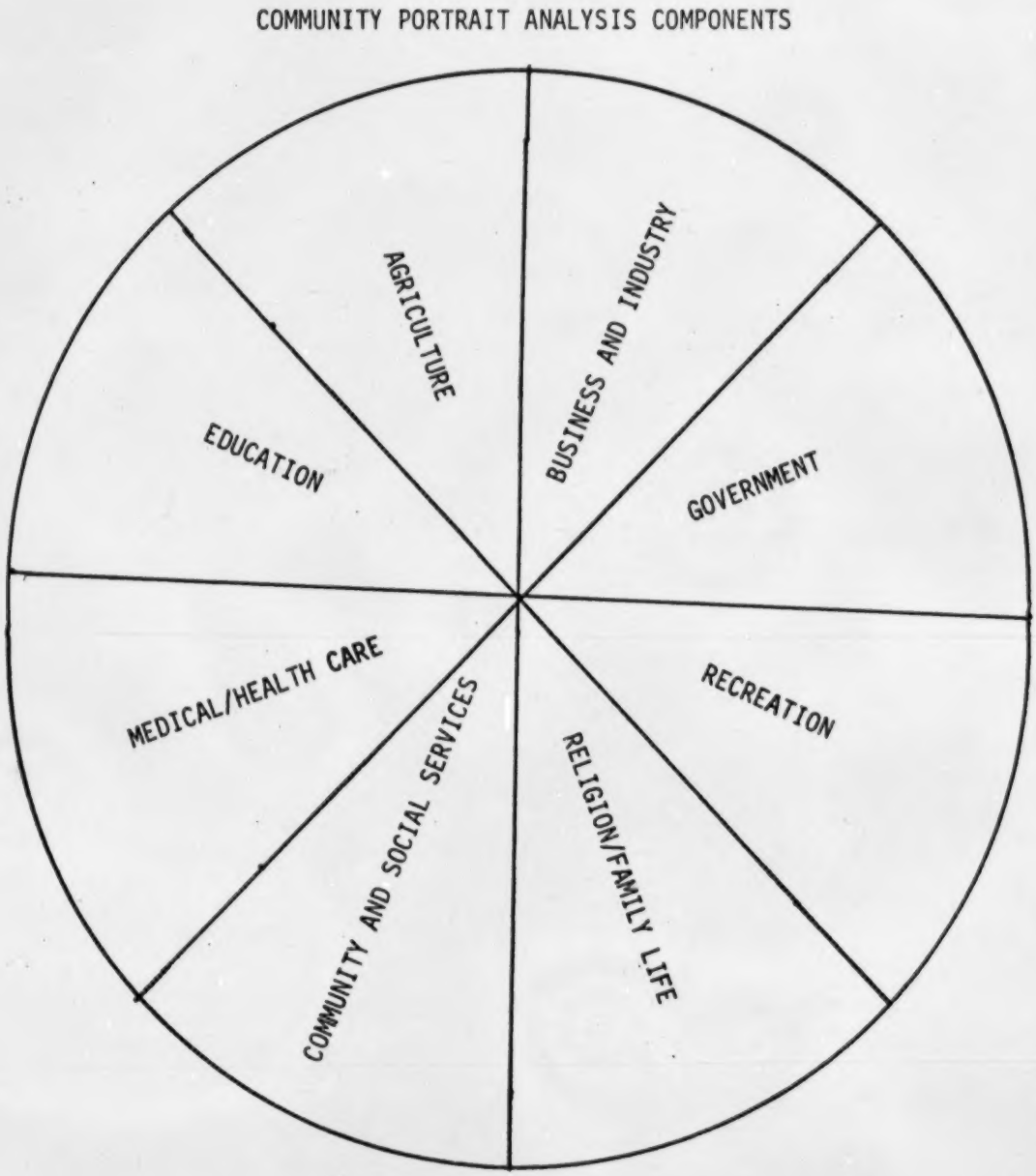
Farmville, a small rural community located in the Southern Piedmont region of Virginia, was selected as a study site for two simple reasons. First, it is the place of residence of the writer and therefore minimized time/money design considerations. Second, Farmville fits into Weber's typological approach as a certain type of place, meriting study for the comparative, historical insights it can yield.

A. A Conservative Small Town

The history of Farmville ensures its identification as a small southern conservative rural town and then some. Farmville is located geographically

FIGURE 1

COMMUNITY PORTRAIT ANALYSIS
(ADOPTED FROM KUVLESKY AND BALLARD, 1980)



and culturally within an area that includes the location of the surrender of the Conferderate Army to the Union Army (Appomattox, VA), the final battle of the Civil War (Saylor's Creek), the heart of Virginia's tobacco growing region and remnant of the plantation lifestyle of the old south, the site of the only public school system to shut down rather than integrate classes (1958-1962), and a geographical location which also hosts Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority operations and the PTL Club.

B. Sample Selection

The strategy for identifying local leaders in the ten component areas of the Community Portrait was similar to methods used in recent network research (Laumann and Pappi, 1976; Deseran and Black, 1981). The selection process was limited to those leaders who were viewed as decision-makers, policy setters, etc., who were in positions or locations of knowledge, responsibility, and reputation for the areas which comprise the Community Portrait. An initial panel of experts produced a list of sixty influentials. Fifty-one local leaders were interviewed for this research in nine of the ten areas covered in the Community Portrait. Six leaders identified within Education have not yet been interviewed, one other leader is now deceased, and two more have refused to participate in the study.

C. Some Background Data

Equally as important as its conservative character for understanding the cultural ethos of the Farmville area is the general economic status of Farmville and Prince Edward County, Virginia. Economic indicators such as per capita income and unemployment figures suggest two things about the Farmville/Prince Edward County area. First, adjusted gross income is only seventy-one percent of the State of Virginia figure (Virginia, $8,662; Prince Edward County, $6,157).[1] A similar "below average" rating is revealed in per capita personal income (Virginia, $9,406; Prince Edward County, $6,225 - also compared to national average, $9,511).

Second, unemployment data show Prince Edward County exceeding the state average for May, 1983; Virginia, 6.0%, Prince Edward County, 7.3%.[2] Prince Edward County's unemployment rate has lowered significantly this year from the two-year high mark of 12.8% in March, 1982. The state's largest unemployment figure was 9.0% in January, 1983.

Prince Edward County and Farmville have not experienced declining population, however, due to the stability and insulation that Longwood College, a four-year state supported liberal arts college provides. The competing economic forces of the historical, agrarian, plantation south, still in evidence today, and the professional character of employment at Longwood College and Hampden-Sydney College, a private elite men's college also located in Prince Edward County, contribute to an understanding of the class relations and cultural differences which exist in the area.

FINDINGS:

Declining Revenue Effects

The interview data confirms Lassey's preliminary finding that the effects of Federal budget cutbacks will be felt less in rural communities that have failed to secure Federal dollars in the past. This is to say that public revenue, resource poor communities have so little to be cut back in the first place. Farmville's economic and political conservatism accentuates the fiscal austerity and rejection of external resources as "outside intervention". Concern about external influence and loss of local autonomy, you may recall, was epitomized in the closing of the public school system in Prince Edward County during the 1958-1962 period. The contest was eventually settled in the U.S. Supreme Court, indicating the strength and intensity of the beliefs, values, and cultural patterns of the Farmville area. Class relations are more closely observable, as several subjects noted, by racial segregation and its remnants in housing,

education, civic groups, political and elected governmental positions, recreation, and religious participation.

Some Were Lost or Forgotten

As cutbacks shook social service and community service agencies, outreach and public education functions were lost amid the scramble to secure a survival stragegy. The nurturing, rehabilitative program of one work training agency was replaced with the conservative mandate for agency survival — either the workers show productive capacity or funding is slashed. This scenario was repeated in three different social/community service agencies in Farmville. In effect, programs which dealt with a client's life (more inclusive) were replaced with narrow focused dictums regarding economic marketability, productivity, and viability. What little resources had been developed in a small rural community for social service delivery were wrung dry during this period of cutbacks.

Local businesses found the combined effects of budget tightening and the economic recession to produce a rich labor pool. Since several local industries had "furloughed" up to half of their employees, the pool of workers to choose from was strong, if there were jobs to fill.

In other economic impacts, people in poverty were crossed off as no longer eligible for financial support (i.e., loans, investments, etc.). As interest rates soared, conservative local banks shut out many who, in turn, found private finance companies as their next best option. Of course, these finance companies shifted their eligibility upward to serve those folks who could no longer satisfy the credit criteria of banks, but who were "better risks" than the existing finance company clientele. So, as the economic cutoff points shifted upward, guess who were left without financial help.

The Rich and the Poor

A dichotomy exists in the perception of effects, and this dichotomy can best be characterized as follows:

- People in middle and upper income levels felt little or no effects of declining public revenues and a tightening of the economy;
- People in lower income levels were affected more frequently and more intensely by the cutbacks and effects of economic recession.

SUMMARY

Farmville can be said to be an arena of class relations that evolve around the haves and have-nots. Economic status is the focus of group conflict and value conflict over what is deemed right, normal, expected, and tolerated throughout the established conservative institutional structure of the community. Yes, cutbacks hurt less when there isn't much to cut. Still, a picture emerges from the Community Portrait Analysis of a town woefully underdeveloped regarding meeting the needs of people in need and in poverty. Years of contested values have not produced assimulation or pluralism. Each public expenditure is scrutinized for how much of the resource commitment will find its way into actual public use. You see, "public" often translates into a zero-sum calculation between those controlling resources in Farmville and the general public needing, and, at times, demanding services. In conclusion, note that Farmville is the largest town in Virginia without a public library!

Footnotes

[1]Data presented in this section are taken from the Regional Economic Information System, Bureau of Economic Analyses, U.S. Department of Commerce. Farmville's Town status under Virginia law limits the amount of data available, thus Prince Edward County data are used in this analysis.

[2]Virginia Employment Commission Unemployment Data, 1980-1982 and January-May, 1983

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